

The Dominance of Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE. By Raymond Macdonald Alden. Duffield & Co.

A GLANCE TOWARD SHAKESPEARE. By John Jay Chapman. Atlantic Monthly Press.

PROF. ALDEN, invited to "the agreeable imprudence of writing another book on Shakespeare," confesses that though he had no idea of doing so, he was unable to resist the temptation of making "a compendium of the known facts respecting Shakespeare, and of the prevailing critical judgments of modern scholarship, sufficiently untechnical . . . and uncolored by any desire to prove a case." Considering the matter, he found one or two more excuses for accepting the chance—hence this fluent and delightful book.

To begin with, the author considers the age in which Shakespeare lived, and his setting in Elizabethan England, the significance of the Renaissance in his literary environment and the classical and Italian influences which bore upon him. A chapter follows headed "Life and Words," in which Prof. Alden traces the circumstances of Shakespeare's earlier and later life with no air of imposing either any of the "traditions" or of his own opinions upon the matter as more than current talk which may have held truth in it, but is not to be taken as authentic because it cannot be matched up with any definite facts. "The fact is," says the author, "we know quite as much of him in the externals of his life as we have any right to expect to know of one who was not a subject of public record, like a king, a general or a pope; the only exceptional circumstance is that he was a writer, and in the case of writers we always have hope that they will record themselves—the facts of their essential and spiritual life—in works both directly and indirectly biographic. That Shakespeare failed to do this, to an extent unparalleled by any poet since Homer, is the unforgettable grievance."

In this chapter also is some discursive speculation as to Shakespeare's associates, and as to who were especially his friends, besides some engaging guessing as to the kind of books the young man had assimilated before he came to London, besides the Bible and the prayer book. He was deeply familiar with these, and he probably knew the current versions of the old romances and ballads, possibly Chaucer and Gower and Caxton's ever popular "Book of Troy," and "The Mirror for Magistrates." In London he doubtless saw the work of Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge and Hakluyt's "Voyages," first published at that time. His early identification with the work of the theater was not a checking of his verse making—he called "Venus and Adonis" "the first heir of my invention," and its instant success brought "Lucrece" fast upon its heels. The patronage of the Earl of Southampton was scarcely a greater benefit than his friendship not only with Burbage, Ben Jonson and all the tribe at the theater, but with Spenser, Beaumont and others of established fame. The list of his friends is long, even in the uncertainty about all the unaccented parts of his life. His associates at the theater were much more cordial—even adulatory—than falls to the lot of most of the modern actors and play writers. While much of the chorus of praise was called out by his work, his personal characteristics were summed up in Jonson's words: "He was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature."

In his consideration of the poems as distinct from the plays, the author traces some Italian origins, and notes the maturity of the sonnets in contrast with the narrative poems. In an eloquent summing up, Shakespeare is called "first of all an Elizabethan and a child of the Renaissance; as a dramatist unoriginal both in material and method; his trend was Elizabethan in form but akin to Sophocles in its somber irony and profound sympathy. His dramatic interest is primarily in personality; his characters were created for a given story. . . . His greatness is due chiefly to his comprehensive thinking in terms of personality and conduct, and to his supremely poetic interpretation of action."

Mr. Chapman's ideas, as shown in his writings, are never either perfunctory or obvious. His present brief memoranda on Shakespeare are filled with a luminous exposition of Shakespeare's greatness as it has impressed his capacity to receive and evaluate proportionately and as

It has submerged his critical instinct. Says he: "It was near the end of the eighteenth century that men began to realize the greatness of Shakespeare, and literary persons were then visited with a new, vague and strange experience—the discovery that the power of Shakespeare was beyond the reach of criticism. The labors of scholarship have spread the news till it has become a commonplace. . . . At Athens and Rome all parties had a religious belief in the power of criticism. This breaking of shackles, this plunging of the mind into a mystery that shines the more because it defies analysis is Shakespeare's gift to the world."

Mr. Chapman "glances toward"—as one who cannot gaze steadily at a great light—six or seven of the tragedies, finding much for new and shrewd speculation in his sidelong look. One chapter is on "Shakespeare's Types" and another considers "The Comedies," and the chapter on "The Sonnets" is full of learning and deepest human sense. He says: "The sonnets should be dipped into, or read by the half hour together singly or in sequence . . . they have been written in a mood of quietude and relaxation; perhaps the gentlest mood that the gentlest poet ever knew."

His chapters on "The Plays as Poetry" and "On the Stage" contain ripened judgment and keen discrimination between what their author wrote and what has been piled upon them either by stage usage or by the dusty winds of circumstance. He remarks that "to this author and to their first public Shakespeare's plays were like street concerts, or tales told by a professional traveler . . . almost as ephemeral as charades. Yet the greatness of Shakespeare is bound up with this fleeting and transient purpose of his plays. . . . The light estimate of the stage in Elizabeth's time is what set Shakespeare free; he could give rein to his imagination." And he binds together his sheaf of appreciation in the words:

"His fame as a poet has all but eclipsed his fame as a dramatist, because poetry is a circulating medium which floats into our houses, whereas a drama implies a journey to a playhouse. . . . Nevertheless the drama and the bones of dramatic construction, the management of plot, the arts of speech and rhetoric are always at play in him. They are the wings of his vehicle. . . . The footlights are our best guide to him, and if he shall be lost to the living stage a great part of his meaning would vanish."

Shakespeare's Favorite King

HENRY VI. By Mabel E. Christie. Houghton Mifflin Company.

MOST of us have acquired what knowledge—or acquaintance—we have of English history from Shakespeare plus a few dates and fragments of events retained from school days. There is a persistence of impression in the Shakespearean portraits that lasts, even if it be modified or corrected by the prosaic study of more accurate sources of information. It is hardly necessary to remind ourselves that the dramatist rearranged his data from the chronicles whenever he felt it desirable to do so. The remarkable thing is not the occasional divergence so much as the fundamental truth and essential accuracy of his wonderful portraits. He has fixed for all time our conception of the characters of most of the great figures in the long procession of monarchs and statesmen from King John to Henry VIII.

From that starting point it is worth noting that Shakespeare found in the reign of Henry VI. material for no less than three long plays, some of which are not so familiar to most readers to-day as certain others of the historical series, but none the less of undiminished importance. The period covered, 1421 to 1471, was a half century of change, turmoil and development, a period that still remains a rich field for the investigator, in spite of the work of such explorers as Stubbs, Green and a host of specialists, and also of popular writers, from Andrew Lang to the least familiar perpetrator of a doctor's thesis.

There is abundant room for so carefully, patiently made a monograph as this new study, which is one of the series dealing with the kings and queens of England issued under the editorship of Robert S. Rait and William Page, who are recognized modern authorities. It is based upon examination of the original data, so far as these are to be had—a mass of material, including the six volumes of the Calendars of the Patent Rolls and the Proceedings of the Privy Council. The period is not over rich in contemporary chronicles of the first rank, save Monstrellet, but as an offset there are the wonderful Paston Letters. This study is an orderly survey and a critical examination of the record, which, although it contains little startlingly new, is valuable in its completeness and also in its estimates of character. It is acceptably phrased and readable enough.

The net result as to Henry VI. himself is much that of the Shakespearean picture:

Was ever king that joy'd an earthly throne
And could command no more content
than I?
No sooner was I crept out of my cradle
But I was made a king, at nine
months old.
Was never subject longed to be a king
As I do long and wish to be a subject.

It would be hard to find a man who was less fitted for rule at the period when kingship happened to him. Our author remarks that "Henry's essential characteristic was his entire unworldliness." He was indifferent to his estate, to wealth, luxury or power; generous, but carelessly so, he was simple, upright and without malice, even through the horrors of civil war. He was, too, affectionate; honestly devoted to Margaret and his son, and he was faithful to his friends. Devout, modest, studious, thoroughly good, but that was not enough. The day called for a strong man. "The people began by loving him for his goodness, but . . . ended by treating him with absolute indifference, and his enemies declared he had not manliness enough to be a king."

Doubtless his only lasting achievement that call for specific remembrance were his educational foundations. Eton stands as his real monument, together with King's College, Cambridge. As a patron and aid of other grammar schools and colleges he also did much to lay the foundations for the great cultural growth of the succeeding age.

This volume follows the whole course of his life and of the great events of the wars, plots, rebellions and intrigues in minute detail. It

will be indispensable to the special student, and also of much of interest to the general reader. The book is unusually well printed, amply illustrated and sufficiently indexed.

Ever since the publication of "Graustark," George Barr McCutcheon has given his characters names which were highly fantastic and unlikely to correspond with the names

of actual people. Yet he has met or heard from people whose names were exactly those he had selected for his books. In one instance, the names of three of his characters were identical with those of a Western man, his wife and daughter, who naturally were incensed at the thought that they had been selected to play the lead in a not altogether dignified romance.

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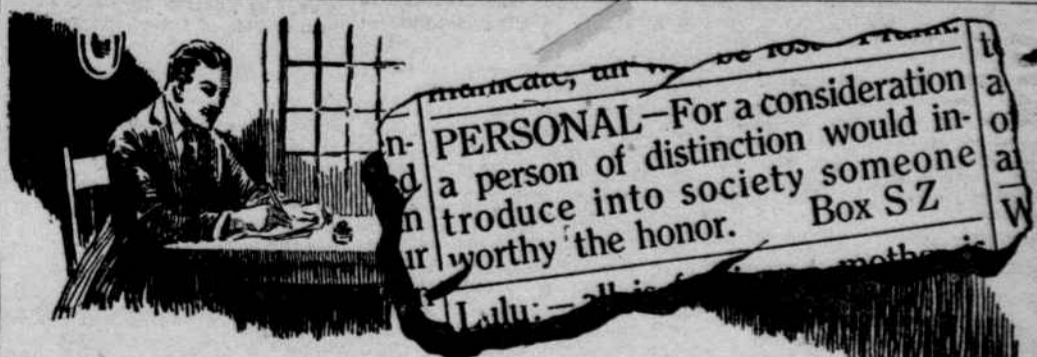
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